



Stratum of Choice

Eric Stein

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POEMS

Eric Stein

Sechelt, BC



Eric Stein, 2023

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If I could burrow like a mole, I would,
and I would like that. I would like
to fly like a bird, if I could. Otherwise,
my stratum of choice is the surface.

—Wendell Berry

CONTENTS

<i>1</i>	Cranes
<i>2</i>	Luna
<i>4</i>	Panic
<i>6</i>	Ellipses
<i>7</i>	Sheets
<i>8</i>	Justin
<i>9</i>	Sprain
<i>10</i>	Cockroach
<i>12</i>	Kepler
<i>14</i>	Papered
<i>19</i>	Barometer
<i>21</i>	Étretat
<i>27</i>	Arcachon
<i>29</i>	Teeth
<i>31</i>	Cartography
<i>34</i>	Fluorescent
<i>35</i>	Bird
<i>36</i>	Sawol
<i>37</i>	Else
<i>44</i>	Coda
<i>46</i>	Afterword

CRANES

Stained fingers. Blue and
green and orange. The sign of
hundreds of paper

cranes. For once I have
made something meaningful, some
thing that has left its

mark on my life, quite
literally so. Blue. Green.
Orange. Now I have

a jar of cranes (*one*
wish) and no one to give them
to. It took too long.

LUNA

Languid the sky burns
With your murky tallow the
Dark pitch bleeds and swirls

Around you like wraiths
Clawing scrabbling fleeting gone
And you continue

On your path across
The vastness a sallow face
Watching and waiting

Always trailing but
Always reaching you caress
The deep distance

Of the night and I
Alone in my disquiet
Search for something in

Your waning but as
The tar fades to inky blue
Then lavender and

Teal twined with woolen
Wreathes I forget what it is
That I hoped to find

PANIC

Is it hot in here?

No? Are your armpits sweating?

Is it cold? Are your

armpits still sweating?

Are you hungry? Did you just
eat? Do you still feel

hungry even though
you just ate? Is that an ache
in your chest? Do you

have asthma? Does it
feel like you have asthma? Is
your throat tight? Do you

just need a drink of
water? Did it help at all?
No? Is your arm sore?

Does your family
have a history of heart
attacks? What's your pulse?

Is it high? Do your
ribs hurt from the thumping? Are
you having trouble

focusing? Have you
made a list? Are you going
to make one now? Did

it help? No? Maybe
go for a run? How far? Do
you like running? No?

Maybe just stay in?
Sit on the couch? Watch a show?
Is it hot in here?

ELLIPSES

ellipses between
friends, my dalliance or your
affair, these are things

even the wind can't
hear. we lock them away, slide
them under the bed

for monsters to play
with, or to be monsters, i
don't know which came first

SHEETS

i still remember
when “the rain fell in sheets” first
meant something: static

lines, morse code from god,
my umbrella in scraps an
empty sacrifice

JUSTIN

it's been two years (i
think) since he died, quiet, in
the night i never

learned from what. all things
pass, a time for everything,
even memories

the clearest when my
brother told me he was gone
no, clearer when he

told me what it was
like to tell me, memories
of memories, all

i have through lenses
doubled back on myself my
i an i through his

SPRAIN

into the air and
down a turn and twist there it
goes snap like nothing

tenuous fibre
obliterated in an
instant days pass and

absent minded i
bend so slightly let it roll
push and stretch and pop

an explosion of
tissue of flame each time the
unlinking becomes

a little nearer
a little less something sought
flesh releasing flesh

COCKROACH

A Cento

mon cher you slimy
creature escaping slipping
refuse to be a

subordinate you
are a vulture living on
the periphery

this deep arrogance
hiding nibbling all who
do not conform to

your horrific looks
good-for-nothing murderer
the last day come to

pass foremen and slave
drivers future ruling race
striped beast under whips

half-naked chasing
creatures slapping them flat slap
your face anger hmmm

the voice said stop your
insults lifted slippers act
on it here mon cher

KEPLER

keplerian i
sit in the darkness, a speck,
a cosmic mote of

dust absorbed into
the background, tracing, gazing,
calculating the

new mathematics
of meaning that your body
reveals to me, your

trajectory and
contours, your luminance and
gravitation, my

sun, my moon, my light,
whose imperceptible pull
sways the very tides

of my inmost self,
i am trapped, bound up in your
influence, fragment

of flesh cast into
orbit, constellated and
captured by your dance

immortal transit
cross the firmament of
planken space-time, your

every step marked as
an omen, a portent, a
sign of the divine,

to bless or curse, to
take into your embrace, or
discard forever,

i know not, simple
souled, but wish and wait, count
the days and seasons,

and pray that i may
enter into your beauty,
forever and ever more

PAPERED

in every image
i see you i search for you
i draw your features

from my mind and place
them on and into that which
i behold and so

in doing find new
beauty there that before
was hid or only

fleeting made so fixed
in relation to your light
brighter even than

these here to my eyes
though you so far each day from
me a memory

so sweet so soft yet
still in mind in heart alone
you reside until

i return to you
and there you and i now we
one made two by miles

and sea are restored
to that better state distance
so dissolved are yet

stronger brilliant
architect of desire in
me constructing a

foundation deeper
than the world beneath roots and
caverns and the doors

of dark forgotten
buried realms scaffold my eyes
with beams supple and

strong take hold of me
every thought and sensation
etch your mark into

me consecrate me
with a kiss let your lips play
across my structure

and with a breath bring
life to my stony frame yes
gentle architect

kiss me and kiss me
until every stone cries out
with the music of

your touch harmony
of line and shape brick upon
brick placed with perfect

care now brought into
the sweep of song symphony
of earth and mortar

each a note in a
melody only you know
how to play building

longing an aching
i cannot bear to describe
not fully not here

not in the ruined
silence of this place this land
separated by

time itself those nine
horrendous hours how can i
sing when the song is

yours alone so here
i wait my blood cooling heart
ceasing its beat the

life seeping from my
flesh i am returned to stone
empty rooms brittle

reflection of these
monuments here depicted
on scraps of paper

that i with pen in
hand scratch and mark and lay down
lines new schematics

of my heart my mind
my life so yours in words made
whole refreshed and found

again in the long
return to myself yourself
ourselves a whole a

black lettered refrain
echo of song and dancing
shadows whirling in

the corners of these
waking halls a dream a myth
remembered and made

present again here
before my eyes and yours my
papered inky soul

BAROMETER

For Flaubert

fifteen fellows sit,
connote—cnut? no, that's for
another class, not

this—useless! no, it's
perfect! i love it! i don't,
unnecessary,

superfluous! we
talk and talk, knock around words,
knock on wood, pulped, mulched

ensheeted (we make
up our own—we are the text)—
old deaf maid praying

to a parrot, the house
an empty skeleton, and
she, its heart, still flesh,

still beating, half—but
everywhere present, nowhere
visible, she, he,

it, holy plumage,
stuffed idol of hope, desire,
hunger, and there, on

its stand, decaying
fetish—what has she lost? what
has she had? what have

we—this chair is so
uncomfortable—coffee,
i need some coffee

ÉTRETAT

i feel as though i
have come upon the edge of
my self my pebbled

world reduced to this
thin strip bounded buttressed by
shrouded cliffs pocked and

scarred with the passing
of moons every cranny a
fringe a place between

waiting for that one
enormous swell to wash them
clean scour every nook

of every scrap and
vestige to be pummelled smooth
by that great churning

immensity or
not perhaps only to wait
and wait still more for

a cleansing that will
never come perhaps indeed
this one or two are

just too high too far
removed from the waves below
too distant even

for the deep under
which mountains and multitudes
are raised and ruined

all hidden from our
feeble eyes like myself here
upon this clouded

beach each stone a part
a fragment under foot so
faceless featureless

as to be foreign
my left a stranger to my
right still further an

enemy there is
no telling friend from foe here
within the band of

myself horizon
line a tessellated mark
transfixing sea and

sky dividing plane
carved from this muted strand and
cast blindly into

eternity that
invisible shore beyond
all shores beyond all

selves even those to
whom it is anchored even
i burdened aching

wanderer looking
for some friendly harbor the
other side of this

desolation some
elysium or even
just a place to lay

my head a little
food a little warmth and a
little rest but i

am but a point this
line condensed crushed into an
instant in the vast

sweep of forever
or less still in my own half
blind recollection

my mind engulfed with
the eddies of events past
spotted with the moods

and ideas and
actions of those other selves
that i call my own

that i call i a
continuum of causes
and effects bound so

tenuously by
this thing that i say is me
my self my being

this fractured riven
soul divided and pitted
against itself will

but a plaything of
desire leading the whole to
turn inward and so

to fold and bend
to recur this rocky bit
of sea kissed soil a

loop so twisted by
the ever self defeating
vagaries of this

constantly shifting
imperfect world twisted by
the vice of that far

off horizon that
dream of fixity always
just beyond our reach

twisted by hands that
have forgotten each other
given over to

the sad fiction of
totality i am but
a part and here on

shaking feet i stand
and look my body full fore
to that expanse no

more to turn upon
my heel in desperation
but to wait and feel

the tug of lunar
machinations upon all
around me till the

tide washes over
and i am brought into those
hallowed depths at last

ARCACHON

tide-heaped this hill in
prehistoric past shifting
bedrock not one but

millions ground and
compacted self-digesting
till a shoot a sprig

a single life from
the earth shuddering reaching
to the sun still more

after following
ages turning round axis
and anchor till now

another i with
absent steps walks between these
twisted boughs trunks wound

and gnarled rooted wide
in loamy sea-birtherd soil and
a song my lips here

escapes wordless half
forgotten tune but still with
crickets chirping in

the grass and on the
wind the waves dancing breaking
i sing a part an

i among these no
i but that in leaf and bark
fragile carapace

of skin wind-touched worth
nought but that which i am caught
up in the silent

hum of things still and
planted till all fades and the
stars blink from the sky

TEETH

there is a topography
of the self revealed in hands
exposed to cold submerged in
water touched to the stove

in fingers shredded and nails
carved by incisors as i
sit here shivering waiting
for the train to arrive

at the platform as i search
my bag for the small white first
aid kit that has become a
necessity that by

virtue of this careening
world has embedded itself
as a fixture of my stark
and shifting landscape of

my neuroses projected
in bitter tweets and eery
late night posts to instagram
in the striations of

skin flayed from aching bones yes
this box of superficial
remedies is nothing but
a palliative a

temporary dam holding
back the wild and restless rush
of the unconscious that beast
contained in binary

and in metadata and
in user preferences
that howls in dreams and symptoms
but never shows its face

that thing that lurks in shadows
and handles and bios that
thing beneath the surface that
only teeth can reveal

CARTOGRAPHY

this an unfurling
cartography with legend
of memories marked

in the synaptic
parchment of mind this my life
this my being inked

in blood in breath in
waking and sleeping in this
the oscillation

of self between poles
in wandering transit through these
wild expanses of

experience this
wilderness of dragons and
dreams this map i lay

before me seeking
in recollection in its
creases and etchings

some way ahead the
path through markings yet to be
taken drawn forward

by a landscape yet
to be seen but the edges
blur the ink bleeds and

the land breaks apart
fragmenting as if submerged
structure lost to the

current my way a
sodden field washed by all these
possibilities

by the infinite
potential contained in my
every step in my

every moment in
the absence of self beyond
the borders of my

present not null not
void but a saturation
of the limitless

here in the limit
in the horizon of my
meanings that cannot

ever be inscribed
in full that in silence and
shadow in the strange

and ineffable
blankness of my future there
is something more than

myself yet to be
revealed something more than now
that by its tidal

pull weaves this instance
into the blazing fabric
of eternity

FLUORESCENT

what horror these raw
fluorescent bulbs in all of
their hyperbolic

meaning like the great
glassy edifices of post
modernity these

so awful in their
tubular prolongation
of the ache in my

eyes that trace their length
as stupor drags across my
corneas like sand

like these my words these
trite similes my attempts
to understand to

attribute a wild
significance to things that
hang inert above

BIRD

i remember this
bird that spent its days trying
to smash its brains out

against our backdoor
thock thock thock against the glass
and then a skitter

of talons as it
took to wing stunned but alive
i remember the

repetition and
i remember when it stopped and
we knew the bird was gone

SAWOL

centred and
looking and there

singular this
indivisible this

slap slap on
the floor this step

and sorry thwack
the door and i

in eyes another
cross the hinge

opening deep
below and burning

mirror promethean
eating the sun

ELSE

how far
to iterate this

life my own
and hers

we wander and
fall we

are

and you

how to address
the absent

the nonexistent
how to embrace

anticipation
how to inhale

dread and
exhale promise

how to be
there for another

with

as

another

do you think of me
perhaps sometimes

in dreams of dreams
do you imagine

life
dawn
breath

do you wish for
something

someone
do you

do i

she and i
our screens and

fingers whisper
back forth

back again
we speak

without tongues
and wonder

we drip trepidation
we are
we wait

how to bridge creation
how to hold back

the word
sink the dam

its foundations
in earth

in flesh

teeth and eye
and hand and

heart
in mine

in yours

the twining
is

and so all
began

but that is another
story

and this
is ours

or it might be
the two another

and this

years past
the encounter

past beginnings
in voice and look

in the caress of memory
turned in time

into us

into you

we awoke
in longing

stepped from the
sea entangled

foam spattered
and drenched in fullness

together
each the other's

own

but more not one
enumerated

bounded
or

contained
nor one less

awaiting completion
no

we stepped and
became

something

someone

else

CODA

stone heart set in fold
of sea

curled red
finger beckons the

wind

AFTERWORD

This collection includes some of my earliest poems, and many of my first experiments with language and form, which would go on to shape the poetics of my larger, more systematic works *On the Back of a Tiger* and *The Deep*.

This chapbook is very much a part of my juvenilia, but along with all the other work that I have made available from the years of my formation, I hope there is something of value to be gleaned here, or at least the contour of a trajectory to be followed and interpreted.

There is a youthful passion verging on catastrophe in these pages. When I read these poems after all this time, I am thrown right back into the wash of intense feeling that characterized my youth, the pain and terror of being alive, the world before me, full of chaos and heartache and wonder and love.

Caught up in the swell, adrift in the infinite, I try to get my head above water long enough to survey the horizon, to plot a course for some different shore. Perhaps I will encounter other swimmers here, drawn along by the tide of recurrence and return.

Eric Stein, 2023



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